Students' notes

Translating a poem from Latin

Epigram Number 68, from Book 9 of *Epigrammata* by Martial (c AD 40–c AD 104)

Marcus Valerius Martialis, the poet known as Martial, was born in north-east Spain – part of the Roman Empire then – in about AD 40 on the first of March (hence the *Martialis*). He went to Rome in his early twenties, and stayed there; Rome is the setting of his amusing poems and often their subject too.

He called his short poems *Epigrammata*, giving us a word we still use in English – *epigram*: a short, usually amusing poem. His first book of epigrams was published in AD 85. He says of himself that he was 'known the world over for his neat and witty epigrams'; judging from poems like the one below, it's not hard to believe he was.

1

Whether or not you are learning Latin and able to read some Latin text, the first step in translating is for you to hear the poem – as your teacher reads it aloud to you. Latin isn't any longer a spoken language, so it isn't easy to be sure how poems sounded. But evidently the rhythms of a line of Latin verse depend on some vowel-sounds being 'long', or drawn out (like, say, 'moon' in English) and others being short (as in 'mop'). Modern readers lengthen some vowel sounds rather as Italian speakers do. (You can hear that happening in performances of Latin poetry on the websites listed at the end of these notes.)

How it sounds is important; it is the 'music' of the poem, which you can start to respond to – to some extent at least – before knowing just what the poem means. Listen again to – for instance – *nam vigilare leve est, pervigilare grave est* – noticing that that sentence comes just after *non tota nocte.*

Martial: *Epigrammata*, Book 9, Number 68

Quid tibi nobiscum est, ludi scelerate magister,
invisum pueris virginibusque caput?
nondum cristati rupere silentia galli:
murmure iam saevo verberibusque tonas.
tam grave percussis incudibus aera resultant, *5*
causidicum medio cum faber aptat equo:
mitior in magno clamor furit amphitheatro,
vincenti parmae cum sua turba favet.
vicini somnum – non tota nocte – rogamus:
nam vigilare leve est, pervigilare grave est. *10*
discipulos dimitte tuos. Vis, garrule, quantum
accipis ut clames, accipere ut taceas?

Once you have heard the poem read aloud, try to read it aloud yourself, with your partner or in your group. If you are not studying Latin, remember that many translators are in the same position, not knowing the language they translate from. But you will connect – as they do – the look and sound of many words in Latin with words in English. And hearing words like *clamor, percussis* and *garrule* may perhaps give you a clue as to what is going on.

2

It will help you to have in front of you a rough 'literal' translation of the poem. Translators sometimes call this a 'trot', meaning a plain word-for-word English version, without any of the rhythm or shape of the original, and since it's translated from another language 'directly', the English will at times sound rough and ready, even awkward.

The 'trot' mustn't be despised; it can be the basis of your group's translation, or your own Martial poem – necessarily so if you know no Latin. Fine translators use a kind of x-ray intuition to 'see through' such a plain literal version to the poem beneath.

You may still want to look up some Latin words. A word of caution, too, about those English-sounding Latin words. Don't take for granted that their meaning in English is precisely what it is in Latin. Check with a

dictionary. You'll find that *murmure,* for instance, is a much bigger sound than 'murmur'. And you wouldn't immediately connect the meaning of *resultant* with 'result'.

> ***Martial: Epigrammata, Book 9, Number 68*** – a rough prose translation:
>
> *What for you is (your problem with us), you accursed play/nursery school master,*
> *a thing/leader/head disliked equally by boys and girls?*
> *The crested cocks haven't yet broken the silence,*
> *now you're thundering out with savage roaring and banging,*
> *as noisily as the bronzes ring out clattered with hammers*
> *as the craftsman fits the lawyer on the middle of his horse;*
> *no less of a clamour rages in the large amphitheatre,*
> *when the mob favours/applauds the conquering small-shield (gladiator).*
> *We, your neighbours, do not request that you permit us to sleep for the whole night –*
> *it is a small thing to be occasionally wakened – but to be kept awake all night is a serious affair.*
> *Would you like, noisy man, to accept as much for staying silent as you earn for making a noise?*

3

The speaker is angry, it seems. Listen, in the first line, to *scelerate magister*: *scelerate* is a strong word, and the '*sc*' and the word's four syllables themselves almost make it sound angry – you *scelerate (*accursed, criminal, abominable*) magister.* (Feel how your chin juts forward threateningly on the 'scel'.)

But – as with other words and phrases in the poem – you will need to find a just-right word for *scelerate* to decide how angry the speaker of the poem really is. Is he white-faced furious, or is he 'putting it on' a bit, acting very cross for the reader's amusement? In other words, does the fun of the poem come from some ironic, tongue-in-cheek exaggeration? ('Hyperbole' is the nice once-Greek word for this.)

To settle this, it may be useful to try translating the key final two lines. Is what is suggested (or offered?) a serious or joke proposition? To start my translation, I shall experiment with versions of these two crucial lines. Here's my first version:

> *Send away / Dismiss your class. Would you like, Mr Mouth, to get the same as you earn for your racket for keeping quiet instead?*

It is awkward. And 'keeping quiet' suggests secrets. But maybe 'Mr Mouth' would do nicely for *garrule*?

Here's a second try*:*

> *I suggest you dispose of your young charges, and decide to take your wages not for making a racket but for shutting up.*

That sounds rude rather than funny. I shall keep experimenting. But how is your group going to approach those lines? Perhaps you would prefer to start at the beginning? That would be fine too.

4

Deciding how you would like the last two lines to go will help you decide what (your) Martial's tone of voice is. If your group translation – or each of your translations – sounds seriously angry, you may have missed some irony, some comedy. To take another example: when he says this teacher makes as much din as the workers in bronze hammering away on the equestrian statues they make for lawyers, is he exaggerating, for effect? He's certainly sending up vain lawyers who like to erect expensive statues of themselves on horseback.
What about other basics: form, syllable-count, line-length? You'll notice that the even-numbered lines are twelve syllables long, the odd lines longer. Would rhyme help, or would it get in the way? The poem's twelve lines might nicely fit the sonnet shape – and there are 'sonnets' in English of twelve lines. Not all of them rhyme, either.

There is no 'right' way to translate the poem. Your translations are your poems, and you are the writers who will decide whether a translation will be a sonnet or a 'blank-verse' (non-rhyming) poem, perhaps with

lines of five stresses like Shakespeare in his plays, or a piece of free verse, or a poem in rhyming couplets. It's up to you.

Robert Hull, 2015

On these websites you will find information about Martial and translations of many of his *Epigrams*:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martial

http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/martial_epigrams_book09.htm

http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Martial.htm

You'll find some brilliant podcasts, with readings in Latin, and commentaries on various Latin poems, at:

http://blogs.dickinson.edu/latin-poetry-podcast/
http://www.readinglatinpoetry.com/podcast/?author=53647944e4b0a8d04d93b2balati